

Fishery Bay

Site of Archaeological Significance

Fishery Bay Whale Fishery (c1837-1841)

Historical documents suggest that the Fishery Bay Whaling Station (also known as the Sleaford Bay Fishery) was established by the South Australian Company in 1837. It was operated during 1839 by 56 whalers, who were employed by the United Fishing Company of Adelaide - a partnership between the South Australian Company and Hack & Co. By June of that year only six whales had been captured, due in part to the appointment of inexperienced headsmen and the subsequent desertion of half the men.

The following season (1840) was profitable, with a recorded yield of 113 barrels of oil, equivalent to about 12 whales. By late 1841 the South Australian Company had withdrawn from the partnership, and severe financial difficulties had forced Hack & Co to sell their whaling interests to Jacob Hagen & John Hart. The Fishery Bay Whaling Station operated for only a further three to four months before it was abandoned.

A Heritage SA project
supported by Coastcare.



Trypot similar to those used at Fishery Bay



Tryworks floor prior to excavation (side view)



Excavating the site



Exposed tryworks floor

Whaling and sealing were the colony's first export industries, but little physical or historical evidence of these activities survives. The former Fishery Bay Whaling Station, including accommodation area, tryworks and well, has been entered in the State Heritage Register as the most extensive remains of the whaling industry in South Australia. Recent archaeological excavation has revealed significant engineering works, including one of the most complete tryworks platforms in Australia.

Tryworks

A tryworks, consisting of a brick platform and large iron pots, was constructed at nineteenth century whaling stations for 'trying-out' (boiling) the oil from whale blubber. The tryworks at Fishery Bay was constructed on a raised platform at the northern end of the bay. Other engineering works included a stone seawall to protect the site and a cleared channel for stripping the blubber from the whales (flensing).

Since its abandonment in 1841, the Fishery Bay tryworks has been seriously eroded by the sea and damaged by the illegal removal of uncovered artefacts. In September 2001 an archaeological excavation was undertaken to record and salvage any remaining structures before they disappeared.

The excavation revealed an archaeological treasure - an almost complete tryworks floor with blackened areas outlining the original positions of the large trypots. On-site preservation of this rare and significant heritage site became a priority. A protective wall was constructed on the seaward side of the tryworks platform. The excavated areas were surveyed, photographed and carefully reburied.

Future management of the Fishery Bay Whaling Station includes additional conservation and archaeological work with further on-site interpretation planned.